

Pace Analysis

By Barry Meadow

One of the first questions handicappers should ask is this:

Given each horse's running style, what is the probable pace of the race?

I first learned about pace while running cross-country in high school.

Generally I ran the 2.4 miles at Van Cortlandt Park at a steady, even rate. But one week I decided to see what would happen if I flew from the starting line and dashed across the quarter-mile flats that led into the hills. So I zoomed out of there to lead the field of 400 into the hills.

And ran my worst time ever.

Thus it is in horse racing. Every horse is different--but in general, *the faster a horse goes early, the less he'll have left for the finish*. It may be an oversimplification and is not entirely true for everybody, but if a horse runs a 103 pace figure but only a 97 final figure, if he's allowed to run a 97 pace figure next time he might turn in a 103 final figure.

This fact has a huge influence on race handicapping. Take a one-mile race that starts close to a turn. A horse from the 10 post tries for the lead but is forced to go four-wide into the quick early fraction. *That's it--he's finished*. It doesn't matter what else happens in the race; he's already depleted himself.

The opposite happens to a closer who's caught behind a snail's pace. In another one-mile race, the leader goes 23.3 and 48.3 en route to a clocking of 1:36. The closer is ten lengths back at the half. To win, he'd have to come the last half in about 45 flat (probably faster, since he'll need to go wide). Again, once that half-mile fraction goes up, *that's it--he's finished*.

To the average fan, the race is won or lost in the stretch. To the more sophisticated player, the race--at least for some horses--may already be over well before the first quarter of the race has been run.

The main thing to remember about horse racing is that it's *racin*g. If horses ran a

straightaway (as they do in quarterhorse racing) going as fast as they could throughout the race, then speed figures would reign supreme. You'd spend almost all your handicapping time developing the finest numbers you could and use those as virtually all-encompassing.

But because thoroughbreds do *not* go all out throughout a race, things are different. Horses are asked for speed at different points--some early, some middle, some late. It's true that in a six-furlong sprint the first quarter is nearly always fastest with the second quarter next and the last quarter the slowest. Nonetheless, not every horse is used equally in these segments.

Some must get the lead early or they lose interest (22, 45, 1:11). Others prefer to stalk the leaders and pounce in the lane (22.2, 45.2, 1:11). Still others prefer to dawdle early and motor late (23, 46, 1:11). Horses perform best when they get the situation they like—alone on a relaxingly slow lead, sitting behind two duelers, drafting behind horses on the turf, etc.

Players who ignore pace say that in the end, whoever gets to the wire first wins. And since all three of the above horses are capable of running the same final figure--in their own individual styles--what difference does it make how they get there? Besides, so many horses display differing styles in their races that it's strictly guesswork to try to determine how they'll race today.

Sometimes this is true. In many races, horses have raced only one or two times and have yet to develop a clear running-style preference. Some are trying new distances, adding or subtracting blinkers, changing trainers or jockeys, and their style may change drastically from one start to the next.

Often, however, horses display a marked preference for one style or another. And once they develop one, they're often prisoners of that style. Trainers see that a horse has run its best races in front, for instance, and instruct the jockey to zip out of there. Or the opposite.

An essential rule of using pace: *the greater the number of horses in a race that show a distinct preference for one style or another, the easier it will be to figure the probable pace.*

And its corollary: *the more suicidal frontrunners in the race, the more it sets up*

for a closer; the more stone closers in the race, the more it sets up for a frontrunner.

Analyzing the past running positions, and the fractions, of each horse in their typical races help you guess the probable race setup. Whether you use Moss Pace Figures or a proprietary rating spit out by a computer program, or check velocity ratings, or simply look at raw times, you need some way of determining who might be where, and who can compete given today's likely pace.

Pace figures tell you more about a race than speed figures alone. Looking at past races, for instance, did the horse plod past exhausted duelers, or did he blow by everyone despite a torpid pace?

Pace figures are especially useful to help visualize what happened in races at distances in which you can't simply eyeball the fractions (e.g., a race at one mile and 70 yards). And if horses are returning from six furlongs last time to six furlongs this time, pace figures quickly help you find who figures to be ahead of whom, at least early. If your projected pace figure is, say, 83, how have the contenders done when faced with an 83 pace at this distance? The goal is to find each horse's "performance envelope," an area in which he can succeed.

If one horse generally goes 21.4 to the quarter, and another can't break 22.1, if the latter horse must be on the lead to run his race he can be safely eliminated. If a frontrunner draws post 9 in a one-mile race and the horses in posts 7 and 8 are front-speed types as well, you can pretty much assume that the horse from post 9 won't get his trip. Limit your plays to horses who figure to get decent trips. While horses do occasionally overcome unfavorable trips to win, don't count on it.

The essential problem with pace figures is that they describe only part of a race. Sure, if you could successfully predict every horse who'd be the halfway leader you'd be covered in cash, but this is not as easy as it might seem. Pace figures are also affected by variant errors and track-to-track and distance-to-distance adjustments—and because the distance is shorter than the final number, any error here is magnified (e.g., a half-second error in a marathon means little, but the same error in a 100-meter dash is huge).

Still, it's worth knowing that a horse ran a big, or improved pace figure, even if the final clocking didn't reflect the good effort—or if he ran a suddenly worse pace figure which could indicate a sudden dip in his ability.

And sometimes, a pace edge may be all a horse needs to reverse his poor final-time record.

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